




“The Flow that Pushes you”: Christocentric Reflections on the Compassion Expressed by African American Youths in Chicago Suffering Profound Disadvantage

Katherine Tyson McCrea¹  · C. Kevin Gillespie²

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Abstract

Youth beset by community violence, racism, and deep poverty experience profound suffering, and it is important to learn about their strengths to support them. To that end, we asked African American youths in Chicago what made social services provided to them by the Empowering Counseling Program meaningful to them. Their responses focused on the giving and receiving of compassion. To illuminate these youths' experiences, this study examines their understandings of compassion in light of scriptural references to compassion. In the Old Testament, compassion is a passionate, personal force and an essential virtue. Yahweh self-defines as the compassionate and merciful one. In the New Testament, compassion is the English translation of three different Greek words: *splagchnizomai*, *eleos*, and *agape*. *Splagchnizomai* signifies an inner experience of Jesus that compels him to heal, teach, and nourish people. *Eleos* refers to acts of mercy, a response to human sinfulness exemplified by Jesus' forgiveness, and is a capacity his followers must fulfill. *Agape* refers to God's nature, represented in Jesus, and is a potential in all persons. Themes that the scriptural references and the youths' data have in common are highlighted. In the narratives of both the youths and Scripture, compassionate responses address suffering and alienation with consolation, forgiveness, care, healing, and reconnection. Acts of compassion are to be extended to strangers as well as to friends and family and should always include respect for the autonomy and choices of others. Both the youths and Scripture regard compassion as a transforming liberation from stigma, social oppression, and terror, a life-giving process that brings hope and joy, and a commitment that endures across relationships and time.

Keywords African American youth · After-school social services · Compassion · Liberation theology · Theological response to injustice · Grace

✉ Katherine Tyson McCrea
ktyson@luc.edu

Questions

When asked what meant the most to him about his social services provided by the Empowering Counseling Program, an African American youth in one of Chicago's high-poverty, high-crime communities said, "They care about you." His response was echoed over and over by his peers: the giving and receiving of compassion was the most valuable aspect of social services. Surprisingly, compassion and caring are not very often studied as a part of social services or clinical practice. Yet, if they are a key ingredient from clients' viewpoints, shouldn't we have a better understanding of compassion and caring? The young peoples' priorities are especially notable given that they speak in a context of profound deprivation in which they often lack a stable residence, food, medical care, and safety. Further, they suffer terror from community violence and the humiliating and rejecting onslaughts of segregation and institutional racism. This paper relates these young peoples' thoughts about and reported acts of compassion to Old and New Testament understandings of compassion.

The decision to compare the youths' experiences to biblical narratives about compassion reflects the authors' use of Scripture as a way to gain a better understanding of the identity of Jesus as it can be at work in the present by understanding the person described in the Gospels (Frei, 2013), rather than focusing on historical criticism. From a pastoral perspective, understanding compassion in contemporary experience and Scripture extends the work of Henri Nouwen et al. (Nouwen et al., 1982), who examined some of the biblical terms and narratives for compassion and concluded that compassion is the movement of Christ within us. Finally, in fidelity to the youths' African American tradition, drawing on Scripture reflects the Black liberation theology position that Scripture has been the resource for recognizing that God's intent for persons can be radically more just and loving than what persons experience in their social conditions (Cone, 1997).

One of the escalating dilemmas of the twenty-first century is the impact of deep poverty (Payne, 2017), racism (Alexander, 2012), and community violence on innocent humans. In the United States now, one in five children are not just poor but are in such deep poverty they are hungry (Cuddy et al., 2015). Deep poverty (income below subsistence level) is more prevalent and harder to escape in the United States today than it has ever been since poverty statistics have been recorded (Payne, 2017). Furthermore, by the time they are 18, all youth in urban, poor, high-crime communities feel traumatized by the continual threat of community violence, whether they have heard about it or experienced it directly as witnesses, victims, or perpetrators (Fowler et al., 2009). The sufferings induced by poverty, racism, and community violence are painfully and continually apparent in Chicago, Illinois, which is the context for this work. Chicago has an enduring legacy of being one of the most segregated cities in the country (Hendricks et al., 2017), where state and city governments have been shackled by corruption (Gradel & Simpson, 2015), and policing and criminal justice systems have been cited by the U.S. Department of Justice for their racially targeted cruelty (Fardon, 2017). Consequences of these problems include "the school to prison pipeline" (Alexander, 2012) and communities that suffer among the most violence in the world ("Crime in Chicagoland", 2017).

From a spiritual perspective, profound human suffering produced by injustices can have the theological meaning of evil and reflect what David Tracy called "horror" (Tracy, 2014). The exposure of innocents to violence is horrifying whether it is seemingly unintentional, as occurs when persons' governments provide inadequate safety nets to guarantee subsistence, or if it is intentional, as in genocide, homicide, and corruption that sacrifices the well-being of innocents for greed. Such horrors pose essential questions: What can we as a society and as individuals

do to prevent and remedy these horrors? And how is God with us given that such horrors persist? An inadequate spiritual response to these horrors deepens alienation, as Cardinal Kaspar (2013) so eloquently said: “The proclamation of a God who is insensitive to suffering is a reason God has become alien and finally irrelevant to many human beings” (p. 12). This article aims to offer a Christian touchstone from which to approach pastoral and social services in contexts of profound injustice and suffering while building on the interdisciplinary foundation of psychology of religion (Rambo & Haar Farris, 2011). The psychosocial approach addresses how to respond to the horrors created by contemporary U.S. inequalities. The theological approach offers a perspective on the value of our responsiveness. The context of profound injustices and suffering and the focus on compassion connects in particular with spiritual bases of social movements, including those for liberation. As stated by James Cone (1997), “Truth is found in the dynamic of the divine-human encounter in social existence wherein people recognize the connections between historical struggle and ultimate reality” (p. 136).

Background

Social context The context of this project is a longstanding social services program that provides free counseling and after-school services to impoverished African American youth in Chicago, that originated in a partnership with the youth’s parents, who prioritized supporting their children and reducing their suffering. The Empowering Counseling Program (ECP; <https://empowercounselprog.wixsite.com/ecp-luc>) has, over the past 15 years, served more than 800 youths and trained 60 graduate social work students to serve impoverished youths of color, thanks to local, foundation, state, and federal funding. The program is grounded in trauma-focused psychodynamic treatment models (Gil, 2011; Perry, 1997), the strengths perspective (Saleebey, 2012), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), and self-determination theory (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2000; see McCrea et al., 2019 for more conceptual foundations). Most recently, the ECP partnered with the Risk and Resilience Lab (Professor Maryse Richards, Principal Investigator) to carry out cross-age mentoring services (thanks to funding from the Department of Justice; see savinglivesinsirpingyouth.weebly.com).

Consistent with a participatory action approach (McCrea, 2014), in the initial program phases the first author and a team of student researchers and youth co-researchers asked the ECP youths what was most meaningful to them about the social services they were being provided. The youths consistently prioritized being cared for and caring for others (compassion). In their peer-to-peer interviews with each other about what they valued in their program, the majority preferred receiving mentoring from instructors and each other and serving as mentors to children in their community (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013). Since compassion is not often studied in social services or theological reflection, the youths’ insights merited further exploration. Interviewing the youths about their experiences of compassion yielded the data described below.

Relevance of Christian faith to contemporary injustice and suffering Recognizing that all knowledge starts within a specific heuristic framework (Lonergan 1957/Lonergan, 1992), an initial reflection about the standpoint of this paper may be helpful. A faith perspective for the 21stst century can take no faith heritage for granted given the context of profound social

injustice, the pervasive misuse of religious faith to commit acts of terror and to perpetuate injustice through social policies, and the cultural and spiritual pluralism of our time. In *A Confession and Other Religious Writings* (Tolstoy, 1882), Tolstoy articulated the problem, saying as he resolved an acute crisis about the meaning of his life that for a person to be able to live, they “must either not see the infinite, or have such an explanation of the meaning of life as will connect the finite with the infinite” (Chapter 9). Also searching for the infinite within the finite, David Tracy (1975) saw theology as “the dramatic confrontation, the mutual illuminations and corrections, the possible basic reconciliation between the principal values, cognitive claims, and existential faiths of both a reinterpreted post-modern consciousness and a reinterpreted Christianity” (p. 32). He posited this task is best accomplished by a revisionist method of critical correlation: “philosophical reflection upon the meanings present in common human experience and language, and upon the meanings present in the Christian fact” (p. 43). Summarizing Tracy’s complex theology, the hermeneutical circle includes not just how the Christ event and tradition surrounding it enlighten our contemporary situations, but also what our contemporary situations contribute to our understanding of that event in its radically divergent historical context (Tracy, 1981; see also Sanks, 1993). This perspective is “the concrete movement of faith and the imagination through experience, through time, through the definite, through the human, through the actual life of Christ” (William Lynch, as cited in Kane & Burke, 2017, p. 81).

Here, we start with a contemporary situation, essentially the presence of compassion in youths despite the horrors they have experienced due to systemic injustice, violence, and extreme deprivation. We reflect upon their experiences of compassion in light of contemporary research about compassion and, primarily, the legacy of the Christ event as narrated in the Old and New Testaments. The premise is perhaps best stated by Henri Nouwen, who posited decades ago that our experiences of compassion are our connection, in our lived experience, with Jesus, with immediate manifestations of the Christ event (Nouwen et al., 1982). Examining everyday experience is necessary when one understands God is not only an idea but a living presence with us in our social reality: “God speaks not just one Word in one story, but many liberating words in many sacred stories” (Cone, 1997, p. ix).

The Empowering Counseling Program As noted above, when 203 African American youth participants in an after-school leadership program were asked about what made social services most meaningful for them, they said they found the compassion they gave and received was the most meaningful element in their after-school social services and counseling relationships. These youth were a convenience sample of African American youths residing in two high-poverty, high-crime Chicago South Side communities (Douglas and Woodlawn), among the top 15 of the poorest and most crime-laden communities in Chicago. A systematically selected subsample of 97 was interviewed more deeply about compassion. Specifically, every young person in the program who agreed to be interviewed participated until data saturation was reached at 97.¹

The ECP’s adolescent after-school leadership development program for African American youth on Chicago’s South Side builds on a leadership development and

¹ Saturation in sample selection is a standard used in qualitative research. It means that data are gathered until the researcher finds that no new information is being obtained from informants. When the researcher starts to hear the same information over and over, saturation has been reached and sample selection can end (Saunders et al., 2018).

employment training model. Participating youth receive a stipend and together with instructors plan a curriculum for responding constructively to the many challenges of living in a poverty-level, high-crime community. The youths actively plan program goals and activities, evaluate the program, and contribute to future program design. The program curriculum is described more completely elsewhere (Bulanda et al., 2015), as is the program evaluation process (Bulanda et al., 2013). A weekly “sharing circle” enables youths to share personal beliefs, stories, and concerns. Youths are trained to be co-researchers and interview other youths about how to improve the program. Supportive counseling is provided for the youths, especially for those who report traumas (such as witnessing shootings or deaths), express suicidal or homicidal feelings, or convey their need nonverbally (by withdrawal or aggression). Graduate students in social work provide the services, supervised by doctoral students who in turn are supervised by the lead author, who has more than 30 years clinical social work experience with children and youth. Multiple challenges threaten these youth: chronic hunger, unstable housing that is often without heat or any protection from sweltering summers, schools that lack textbooks, lack of drinkable water and even toilet paper, drive-by shootings, gang intimidation, threats of sexual violence, temptations to drug abuse, and child abuse and neglect.

Even so, the ECP programs average 96% youth attendance. The national high for after-school program attendance is 75%, with most programs falling around 50% (Deschenes et al., 2010). According to the ECP youths, a contributor to their high engagement is the participatory action approach (McCrea, 2014): Involving disadvantaged young persons as co-participants in knowledge creation about their services has been shown to be a way to prevent social exclusion in service provision and knowledge generation, improve the match between research findings and participants’ actual situations (also called ecological validity; Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and increase engagement (Bulanda et al., 2013; Macran et al., 1999). To the extent that their priorities differ from researchers’ agendas, the youths draw attention to variables that otherwise might be unseen or underemphasized (Bellefeuille and Ricks 2010; Sabo Flores, 2008). Moreover, enlisting the youths as experts avoids the negative effects on already relatively disempowered persons of treating them as “objects” (Hall, 2012).

Examining salient features of the youths’ context sheds light on the value of services for them. Being an urban, poor, African American child in the United States entails continually hazardous and traumatizing obstacles to fulfilling one’s goals (Garbarino, 1997). These obstacles include persistent, gnawing hunger, exposure to cold in winter and heat in summer due to inadequate climate control in residences, frightening community violence, family stress, and a higher risk of family violence. Youths in ECP programs lack basic hygiene supplies, winter coats, and shoes. They treasure the snacks we give them so they can share with hungry siblings. Family members sleep in one room, and many have no beds. While one would hope schools would provide resources and relief, neighborhood schools’ funding is so unstable that learning disabled students go without care, and some schools lack drinkable water and toilet paper. One school social worker had only two days a week to care for 400 students. Many school staff are heroic, but others suffered from vicarious trauma and were verbally abusive to the youths. In the course of one year during Chicago’s surge of violence (which occurred 2010–2018), there were six drive-by shootings at the school where the ECP program was located, necessitating the school being locked down. On several occasions, we saw kindergartners walking

themselves home alone five minutes after the shootings. One child was so frightened he brought a steak knife to school in his backpack “for protection,” he said.

Although the traumas and challenges of poverty create great mental health needs, 75–80% of children in poverty who need mental health care never receive it (Addy, Englehardt & Skinner, 2013). In recent years in these Chicago communities, public mental health services have been progressively terminated (Chicago Sun-Times staff, 2016; O’Shea, 2012), meaning youth have no access to mental health care for the traumas they have endured. Because the ECP partnered with neighborhood churches, we saw the profound commitment and strength of the Black churches, which often offered the only food pantry, computer education, counseling, and homeless shelter in their communities. But the needs frequently overwhelmed their resources.

By the time the youths in these neighborhoods are in high school, they are acutely aware of their disadvantage, which includes racial discrimination and city and state politics riddled by corruption and indifference to the injustices and sufferings of innocent children. One 12-year-old commented upon hearing a friend had been shot: “If it had been a whale, it would have been on the front page of the paper, but it’s a Black kid, so no one cares.” Youths seem to experience the wider society as “bystanders,” according to trauma theory (Courtois & Ford, 2009), who perceive human rights violations but do nothing to stop them.

Predominant racist social narratives are that youth in such communities are alienated semi-criminals (Bogert & Hancock, 2020). But in reality, the ECP youths responded to injustices with persistent action on behalf of community children. Initially, the youths focused on studying and promoting alternatives to violence. They chose compassion as their theme and authored a guidebook for helping professionals (Bulanda et al. 2010), created a workbook for peers, and gave several presentations on compassion and anger management. They conducted community health and safety fairs, went on college tours, developed their résumés, authored a social skills curriculum for elementary school children, mentored elementary-age children, and created documentaries about peace-building, sexual and romantic health, and international social work. One spring, as mentioned earlier, a school at which the youths mentored children endured six drive-by shootings. Their peers were injured and bullets flew into their mentees’ classrooms. The youths, focusing on caring for the children, created an anti-violence community forum called Voices of We Who Are Violence-Free, which was attended by more than 240 community leaders, parents, and youths. It is very important to understand how youths could express such dedicated compassion in the face of the sufferings, injustices, and society’s misunderstandings of them.

Process of data gathering and analysis As noted previously, youth-led program evaluations consisted of a co-developed interview protocol. Empowering Counseling Program youths were trained to be interviewers (Bulanda et al., 2013) and to elicit from peers their answers to questions about what the interviewees found most meaningful about their social services (see Appendix 1). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Findings were checked with the youth co-researchers for accuracy and were processed in focus groups with the youths. Consistently, the youths said that giving and receiving care and compassion were most important, so we interviewed a subsample of youths ($n = 97$) about their experiences of compassion (see Appendix 2). Interviewers included the first author, a research assistant, and two youth co-researchers. Data were analyzed qualitatively using a thematic approach,

with a coding manual developed to ensure comprehensiveness of the thematic analysis. The key elements of the findings are described below.

Recent research findings about compassion There is increasing interest in compassion in fields as seemingly disparate as neuroscience, philosophy, education, and sociology. In her philosophical reflection on emotions, Martha Nussbaum (2001) describes compassion as the most reasonable foundation for sound social policy. To summarize some of the more salient neuropsychological and developmental research findings, human infants appear to manifest a capacity for compassion at least as soon as they can walk. Compassion can be developed in schoolchildren as a demonstrable remedy for bullying and other forms of aggression (Gordon, 2009). Studies of compassion have been conducted with adult volunteers (Wuthnow, 1991), adults in psychotherapy (Gilbert, 2005), Tibetan Buddhist monks (Davidson & Harrington, 2001), and undergraduate populations using standardized scales to measure correlations between compassion and previous attachment relationships, altruism, volunteer behavior, and religiosity (Mikulincer et al., 2005; Sprecher & Fehr, 2005). Training in meditation can increase the likelihood that persons will engage in compassionate behavior toward those who are suffering (Condon et al. 2013).

Experimental psychologists such as Andrew Meltzoff (Meltzoff & Decety, 2003) and interpersonal neurobiologist Daniel Siegel (2001) emphasize that there are increasing convergences between psychology and neuroscience based on psychological discoveries about the origins of imitation and empathy in infants and neuroscience's discoveries of mirror neurons. The mirror neurons in the brain appear to be at least partial bases for the human capacity to empathize with the experiences of another and therefore serve as one element in compassion. Siegel (2001) in particular posits a compassionate process, "mindsight," that allows humans to rapidly perceive the emotional states of others and respond in helpful ways to them. Mindsight, which can be impaired by trauma and repaired by compassionate relating, is at the core of psychological healing and constructive and meaningful human relationships.

Developmental trauma (van der Kolk, 2005) and posttraumatic stress disorders typically result in individuals' alienation from others, difficulty empathizing (Garbarino, 1997), and disengagement from community improvement efforts (Pham et al., 2004). Socially traumatized persons are more prone to respond to the distress of others with aggression or withdrawal (Zimbardo, 2007), replicating traumatizing relationships. Trauma and suboptimal early relationships with caregivers can be remedied by being cared for by others (Bingaman, 2009); caring social service relationships appear to modify persons' inner experience of relatedness, with attendant improvements in social and intellectual competence (Sroufe et al., 2005; regarding trauma, see Courtois & Ford, 2009).

Compassion in psychotherapy is the openness to perceive and remedy one's own suffering and the suffering of others in a way that is nonjudgmental and nondefensive (Gilbert, 2005). Like empathy, compassion involves the process of perceiving the inner life and suffering of another. But compassion also includes action to alleviate the other's suffering (Gilbert, 2005). Compassion for others requires a solid base in compassion for oneself and a sense of safety that is usually based in early attachment relationships, making it possible to "understand, tolerate, and integrate a range of feelings" (Gilbert, 2005, p. 43).

The relative dearth of previous studies of compassion has been understood as a consequence of Western scientific standards about what constitutes valuable scientific knowledge. Following the ontological materialism assumed by logical empiricist

philosophies of science, Western social sciences have tended to privilege an understanding of persons that is monadic (individual) rather than relational and is reducible in terms of neurophysiological processes (ontological materialism) rather than ontologically multidimensional (Harrington, 2002). By contrast, compassion is a relational concept that is not reducible to materialist variables.

Scriptural descriptions of compassion

Our approach to biblical texts

Approaching biblical texts is, in Tracy's terms (Grant & Tracy, 1984), entering into a conversation that, if authentic, results in a sense of shock at how well the insights from the texts speak to and reflect on our present experiences. This conversation is made more complex given that the Old and New Testaments do not reflect one or even several voices but rather are the legacy of several hundred scribes who, in dialogue with their communities of faith, over time honed the texts to the Bible's present form (Collins, 2014; Ehrman 2011). In the interpretation of biblical texts, there can be a conflict that at times becomes tense in scholarly communities (Collins, 2014). Historical criticism sees the texts as embedded in a historical context profoundly distinct from our own, with widely divergent commitments to truth (Ehrman 2011) that should not be muddled with beliefs reflecting contemporary contexts. Another ontological dimension is asserted by those who use the Bible as a means for advancing people's spiritual connection with God—pastors, rabbis, and their congregations. "For black people the transcendent reality is none other than Jesus Christ, of whom Scripture speaks. The Bible is the witness to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. .. it was Scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from their slave masters" (Cone, 1997, p. 29).

One approach to this dilemma is to consider Jesus an exegete (Grant & Tracy, 1984). Jesus clearly believed Scripture reflected inspiration by God and made an "appeal to the religious content of scripture as against its merely literal or legal form," and so "he sweeps away the accumulated dust of tradition" (Grant & Tracy, 1984, p. 9). Jesus' view emphasized the Scriptures as a base for "moral command and personal relations as contrasted with merely cultic prescriptions" (Grant & Tracy, 1984, p. 10). Finally, another approach to understanding the Bible is as a window disclosing the identity of God and Jesus (Frei, 2013). Just as none of us could be reduced to stories about us, in Frei's understanding the biblical stories offer us a way to connect with the identity of Jesus, who as Christ inhabits time while transcending time.

In our dialogue with the biblical texts, following Tracy (1981), the use of specific terms for compassion (*racham* and *chamal* in Hebrew; *splogchnizomai*, *eleos*, and *agape* in Greek) is a natural starting place. Here, we also build on the work of Nouwen et al. (1982), who examined biblical usages of terms for compassion as a way to capture a person's inner experience of the living Christ. The following discussion amplifies these authors' exploration, focusing on the terms used in Old and New Testament for compassion and the related constructs of mercy and love, and weaving in relevant examples of experiences of compassion reported by ECP youths.

Old testament compassion: The womb of Yahweh

One Hebrew term for compassion, *racham*, means “the womb of Yahweh” in the sense of cherishing a fetus, or the bowels, which referred to the innermost parts of a person where passions originate. In a similar sense, the title of this article reflects that powerful, irresistible motivation that one ECP youth regarded as a base for compassion: “the flow that pushes you.” *Racham* also refers to great and tender love, mercy, and pity. *Racham* was used when Joseph found he could be reunited with his brother Benjamin, for whom he had yearned deeply. He rushed away to weep privately because “his bowels did yearn upon his brother” (Genesis 43:30 KJV).

Another Hebrew term for compassion is *chamal*, which means to have pity on or to spare. It is used in Exodus 2:6, when the pharaoh’s daughter finds the Hebrew baby Moses crying in the bulrushes. Rather than having Moses killed, as the pharaoh had ordered, she had compassion for him, sending her servant to find his mother to nurse him and then raising him as her own. For both Joseph and the pharaoh’s daughter, compassion brings about deep intimacy. The compassion of the pharaoh’s daughter crosses the profoundly oppressive social barriers of the time between princess and slave and between persons of different faiths. Her compassion becomes the seed for Yahweh’s inspiration of Moses’ leadership of the liberation of the people of Israel. The story conveys that compassion is a universally human capability, of which even a non-Hebrew member of an oppressive enemy of the Hebrews is capable.

Empowering Counseling Program youth also defined compassion as seeking reconciliation rather than continued hostility between groups. A young woman defined an act of compassion as refusing to retaliate against a hostile gang that had shot at her and her friends. She recognized the shooter had mistaken her identity, and she did not want to aggravate hostilities by either retaliating or calling the police, who she feared would also be brutally unfair (with good reason; see the U.S. Department of Justice’s investigation of the Chicago Police Department detailing pervasive violations of the U.S. Constitution in police acts of violence against citizens of color in poor communities on Chicago’s South and West Sides, including the communities where ECP youth resided; Fardon, 2017; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017).

Still later in the Exodus story (34:6), *racham*, along with a Hebrew word meaning gracious, are the terms used for God’s self-revelation to Moses just before God gave the Ten Commandments. It is the compassionate, gracious nature of God that offers the laws that provide structure for human conduct. The Old Testament’s usages of compassion are closely linked to mercy, and in fact the terms often are used together (e.g., in Exodus 34:6 Yahweh from the cloud self-reveals to Moses as the one who is compassionate and merciful).

In the psalms, God’s compassionate nature is associated with God being “slow to anger” in response to human transgressions (Psalms 78:38; 86:15; 112:0; 145:8). God’s compassion is infinite (“His compassions fail not”; Lamentations 3:22 KJV). Thus, Yahweh refrains from punishment, is forgiving, and will even atone for the people’s transgressions. In Psalm 111:4, people are able to know Yahweh because of Yahweh’s compassion. In other words, compassion is the motive behind Yahweh’s self-revelation to persons: “He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered: The Lord is gracious and compassionate” (ESV). Consistent with the liberation emphasis in Exodus, Yahweh specifically enjoins persons to show compassion to those who are impoverished (Proverbs 19:17). Empowering Counseling Program youths frequently described acts of compassion

as giving resources to those who were less fortunate than themselves, such as money to persons who were begging or a seat to an elderly woman on a bus. Jesus' teaching in the Scriptures focused on God's compassion. For instance, Jesus is quoted as citing Hosea twice, saying, "I want you to show mercy [Hebrew *hebed*, translated in Greek as *eleos*], not offer sacrifices. I want you to know me more than I want burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6) when trying to enlighten the Pharisees (Matthew 9:13, 12:7).

New testament compassion: Three Greek terms

The English term 'compassion' is used in the New Testament to translate three Greek terms: *splagchnizomai*, *eleos*, and *agape*. *Agape* is used by John² to describe the very essence of God and God's relationship with persons ("He that loves not knows not God, for God is love," 1 John 4:8). Paul uses *agape* to describe a love that is the highest spiritual gift, at once all-embracing and transcendent: "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4). Following is a summary of how these three terms are used, again taking the hermeneutical approach of focusing on "the mutual, specific determinations of agents, speech, social context, and circumstances that form the indispensable narrative web" (Frei, 1974, p. 150; Hall, 1999).

Jesus being "moved by compassion" in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: *splagchnizomai* *Splagchnizomai* represents a visceral, passionate experience of care. Like the Hebrew term *racham*, it means to have the bowels yearn and to be moved to pity. The ancient Greek understanding was that the bowels were the origin of the passions of anger and love, and so in this understanding compassion is an irresistible inner force that dominates all other internal experiences, akin to what Martha Nussbaum calls an "upheaval of thought" (Nussbaum, 2001). All uses of the term *splagchnizomai* for compassion occur in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (but not in John). *Splagchnizomai* is used to refer to an inner experience of compassion, primarily Jesus' compassion. The term also is used in relation to two figures representing God's love in Jesus' parables: the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son's father. But *splagchnizomai* is not used in the Gospel passages associated with Q (primarily the sayings of Jesus; Robinson et al., 2000), nor to describe any experience of Christ after his resurrection, nor in the book of Acts. As will be seen below, the authors of the Markan Gospels describe the fruits of *splagchnizomai* as healing; feeding the hungry (physically and spiritually); providing consolation, hope, and wisdom; comforting the grieving; and raising from the dead.

Jesus' compassion seems to be an irresistible force, as *splagchnizomai* is often translated as "moved by compassion." It is dramatically evident in the episodes in which people are physically healed by his compassion. Early in his ministry, a leper reached out for help. Jesus had compassion for the leper and healed him, and the man proclaimed his healing with joy to all who would listen. This account sets up themes that persist through other episodes of Jesus' compassion. This was not a dominating imposition but rather a response to a person reaching out to Jesus for help. Jesus' act of *splagchnizomai* responded to persons' outreach towards

² We understand that the authorship of each book of the Old and New Testaments reflects the work of centuries of revising scribes and religious authorities and their communities rather than single authors (Ehrman, 2019), but for convenience we preserve in this article the name of the author traditionally given to each book.

him, brought about physical well-being, hope, and joy, and ended the outcast states of the cared-for persons who had had the courage to ask for help.

Similarly, the ECP youths emphasized that compassion has respect for the autonomy of the cared-for person: it is characterized by respect for the cared-for person's freedom of choice. Their examples were persons comforting those who expressed dismay with a supportive hug, or a grandparent helping the grandchild figure out what she wanted to do rather than telling her what to do.

For the most part, the accounts of the healing brought about by Jesus' compassion were public events and were deeply dramatic. Some episodes pointed to a power that defeated evil and even death. After Jesus healed the centurion's servant, he went to Nain, followed by a large crowd and his disciples. He saw a grieving widow, who had just lost her only son, surrounded by a crowd: "And when Jesus saw her he had compassion [*splagchnizomai*] on her, and told her not to cry" (Luke 7:13). Then, touching the young man's coffin, he commanded him to "rise up." The young man sat up and began speaking, and Jesus gave him to his mother. The crowd was struck with worship and fear (Luke 7:14).

Shortly after Nain, Jesus noticed his disciples and scribes were arguing, and he asked them why. A man from the crowd came to Jesus, saying that he had brought his son to be healed from a demon, but his disciples "did not have the power." When the father brought his son to Jesus, the demon threw the boy down gnashing his teeth, and the father told Jesus that the demon had been in the boy since childhood, causing the boy to throw himself into fire and water and now to be withering away (Mark 9:19). The desperate father, completely allying himself with his possessed child, begged Jesus, "if there is anything you are able to do for us," to "have compassion on us and help us" (*splagchnistheis*). Jesus remonstrated, "If you are able? All things are possible to the one believing." The father, trusting Jesus' perception that his faith might be part of the problem, immediately wept and exclaimed, "I believe, help thou mine unbelief!" Jesus instructed the spirit to come out and trouble the child no more. Immediately the child convulsed and then seemed struck down as if dead, "but Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose" (Mark 9:27 KJV).

Context is revealing. Immediately preceding the casting out of the boy's demon, Mark tells the story of the transfiguration (Mark 9:2; see also Luke 9:29). Jesus was praying on a mountain with Peter, John, and James. God from within a cloud announced that Jesus was his son. The parallels and the sequence of these events suggest that Jesus' healing compassion is a force capable of casting out evil, enduring through death, and powering the resurrection.

Although this exorcism might seem hard to connect with contemporary experiences in a secular culture, it is less difficult if one understands evil as occurring through social structures that cause individuals to carry out heinous acts of violence against other humans (Zimbardo, 2007), ranging from police murdering innocent citizens to the starvation of innocent children due to the public's and policy-makers' persistent neglect of the conditions of deep poverty. The ECP youths' determination to respond to their peers' deaths due to police and community violence and the deprivations of poverty with renewed efforts to care for children in their community can be viewed as a contemporary form of exorcism. Certainly, the youths' compassion creates a respite for cared-for persons experiencing animosity, degradation, and suffering.

Jesus' compassion seems to be an irresistible force that persistently results in healing: "And Jesus went forth, and saw a great multitude, and was moved with compassion toward them, and he healed their sick" (Matthew 14:14 KJV). Jesus' compassion also bore many other fruits, including nourishment, wisdom, hope, health, and joy. Jesus was moved by compassion

to feed the poor and hungry multitudes of persons who had followed him for three days with nothing to eat: “I will not send them away fasting, lest they faint in the way” (Matthew 15:32 KJV; see also Mark 8:2). Compassion moved Jesus to teach about the nature of God: “But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” (Matthew 9:36 KJV; see also Mark 6:34). Jesus’ compassion spurred him to offer consolation, hope, and wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Like the compassionate Yahweh of the Old Testament, who reached out so that people could know Yahweh and Yahweh’s love, Jesus’ compassion caused him to feed people physically and spiritually.

Although the Gospel of John does not use the term *splagchnizomai*, the following excerpt captures key elements associated with *splagchnizomai*. Jesus was profoundly moved by the death of Lazarus and the grieving of his sisters, Mary and Martha, and Lazarus’s Jewish community (John 11:33: “Jesus. . . , at the sight of her tears, in great distress and with a sigh that came straight from the heart. . .”). The English meanings of the Greek terms are “deeply moved” (*embrimaomai*), and “troubled” (*tarraso*) in “spirit” (*pneuma*). John uses *embrimaomai*, which can also mean “sternly admonished,” again in 11:38 in the moment just before Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. As in the Markan Gospels, here Jesus’ compassion causes a profound turning point, from death to resurrection. John describes how Jesus knows he risks death by going to raise Lazarus who, Jesus says, symbolically foretelling his resurrection, is not dead but sleeping. Further, from the day Jesus raised Lazarus, the Sanhedrin vowed to kill him lest the entire nation follow Jesus. Jesus’ compassion started him on the path toward the cross.

In addition to compassion representing a motivating force within Jesus, in the parables *splagchnizomai* is a verb used by Luke to represent critical turning points (Menkens, 1988), moments that generate healing and conversion. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the father’s compassion creates the turning point from the son’s dejection to the son’s joyous forgiveness. Jesus’ compassion for the grief of the widow of Nain causes him to raise her son from the dead (Luke 7:11–17; Menkens, 1988). The miserable woundedness and rejection of a robbed and beaten traveler was changed to a healing process by the compassion of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33). In this sense, compassion is not a noun but a verb, bringing about a change from suffering to forgiveness, hope, joy, and healing. It is akin to Pope Francis’s (2016) remark that the power of mercy makes it more accurately a verb, ‘mercifying.’ As exemplified by Jesus and in the parables, when *splagchnizomai* occurs, people who are alienated or potentially alienated due to suffering mental or physical illness experience God’s self-communication as healing and loving reconnection and support. Or, as Pope Francis quotes Pope Benedict XV, “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (as cited in Ivereigh, 2019). Similarly, when ECP youths described being recipients of compassion, they regarded it as life-changing. One commented, “I never thought that my choices could make any difference in my future. Then the care in this program showed my choices could matter, and everything changed.”

The later books of the New Testament have few references to *splagchnizomai*. Even when describing the many works of the apostles filled with the Holy Spirit in Acts that reflect the healing, wisdom, and press for justice reflected in the fruits of Jesus’ *splagchnizomai*, Luke does not use the terms associated with *splagchnizomai*. In effect, *splagchnizomai* expresses the distinctiveness of the incarnation, as it is used uniquely in the Gospels in the context of Jesus’ ministry and in his parables, primarily to describe the compelling force within him.

Compassion and mercy: *eleos* The Greek term for mercy, *eleos*, which is often translated as compassion, is always used in the context of God’s covenant of salvation and the forgiveness of transgressions. Luke uses *eleos* more than any other evangelist, and he gives it central importance. For examples, Mary’s Magnificat and Zechariah’s praise of God for the gifts of John and Jesus both use the term *eleos*: “His mercy [*eleos*] goes on from generation to generation, to all who fear him” (Mary’s hymn; Luke 1:50) and “He has been merciful [*eleos*] to our ancestors by remembering his sacred covenant with them” (Zechariah’s hymn; Luke 1:72). Luke connects mercy with the nature of God and with God’s covenant, an enduring promise transcending generations and individual relationships and needs. *Eleos* is as forceful as *splagchnizomai* but is from a different inner and relational space. *Eleos* represents the moral bond of a covenant of forgiveness that is known intellectually and spiritually and that will always be honored.

Mark has Jesus use the term *eleos*. The context is that Jesus cast a multitude of spirits, Legion, out of a man wandering among the tombs. Legion begged Jesus to send them into the pigs, and Jesus did, and then the pigs dashed over a hill into a lake and drowned. The terrified crowd begged Jesus to leave them alone, but the man liberated from Legion begged Jesus to allow him to follow Jesus. Jesus replied, “No, go home to your friends, and tell them what wonderful things the Lord has done for you and how merciful [*eleos*] he has been” (5:19). The man did as he was told, and listeners were amazed. Here, *eleos* does not refer to Jesus’ inner life but rather to God’s mercy as expressed in the liberation of the man from the oppressive Legion.

Eleos, as the Markan writers use it, also is connected to forgiveness of sins. In Matthew 9, Jesus healed a man who had been paralyzed, first saying, “Take heart, your sins are forgiven!” When the teachers of law began to cry blasphemy at Jesus’ mercy, Jesus said he could prove he had the authority to forgive sins. He said to the man, “Stand up, take your mat, and go on home, because you are healed!” (9:6). The man did, and the crowd was full of both fear and praise for God. Immediately thereafter, Jesus called a tax collector, Matthew, to discipleship, and later he agreed to Matthew’s invitation to dine at his home with his colleagues. When the Pharisees were indignant that Jesus would dine with such sinners, Jesus replied that “healthy people don’t need a doctor, sick people do” and added, quoting Hosea 9:13, “I [God] want you to be merciful [*eleos*], I don’t want your sacrifices” (Matthew 9:13).

Eleos seems to represent mercy that is the fruit of a covenant, a predictable, promised salvation and liberation from sin. By contrast, Jesus’ *splagchnizomai* is an embrace that heals, alleviates the isolation and despair brought about by suffering, and is so powerful it endures beyond death to eternal life. Both forms of compassion cast out evil, restore caring human connectedness, and instill hope: “take heart,” Jesus said to the paralytic (Matthew 9:2).

Compassion and love in John and the letters of Peter and Paul: *agape* *Agape*, most often translated as love, is closely akin to compassion. *Agape* has been thoroughly debated as a cornerstone of Christian theology, with some regarding it as self-sacrifice in imitation of Jesus’ love. However, African American, feminist, and womanist theologians contend that for societally oppressed persons, framing *agape* as self-sacrifice destructively perpetuates societal expectations that persons sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the privileged (Andolsen, 1981; Cone, 1997). Instead, *agape* can be reframed as a partnership or mutuality that includes attention to God’s respect for oneself contra societal degradations (Farley, 1982), an emphasis that can ground liberation theology in a most personal as well as political sense (Russell, 1974).

The contexts in which *agape* appears indicate a meaning quite distinct from *eleos* and *splagchnizomai*. Luke 7 describes a woman having dinner with Jesus who was thought to have previously sinned greatly. She wept deeply upon being with him, washed his feet with her tears, and anointed his feet with a rare perfume. Simon the Pharisee, watching, had reproachful thoughts. Jesus, perceiving the reproaches, asked Simon, “Who loves more, the person who is forgiven little, or forgiven more?” (7:47) leading Simon to look beyond his prejudice and recognize *agape* as most important. The fruits of *agape* in this episode resemble the fruits of *splagchnizomai* and *eleos*; Jesus’ compassionate mercy results in inspiration towards generous love and reconnection rather than perpetuating stigma and rejection. As will be seen in the examples below, the ECP youths consistently understood compassion as fulfilled by its universality: no one should be excluded from its reach. Perhaps, like the woman in Luke 7, they understood how painful it was to be degraded and rejected and so sought to love without bounds.

Agape differs from *splagchnizomai* and *eleos*. *Agape* is not situational but universally both commanded and possible – it is an essential component of human nature in response to God’s *agape* for persons. The Old Testament Yahweh’s love for persons included anger at their transgressions but faithfulness despite their betrayals. Similarly, *agape* in Jesus’ examples and teachings is the foundation of spiritual life, relevant in all human relationships (Hall, 1999). For example, an expert in the law tested Jesus, asking how to gain eternal life (Luke 10:25). Jesus replied by asking the man how he read what was written about what the Lord commanded (Luke 10:26). The man replied, “You must love [*agape*] the Lord thy God with all your heart and all your strength and all your mind, and love [*agape*] your neighbor as yourself” (Luke 10:27)—and then famously asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, who as already noted was moved by *splagchnizomai*. Thus, *agape* tends to signify a form of love that exists within persons and that they must actualize. At the same time, the commandment implies that, with commitment, one can find in oneself the *agape* God gives humans to give to God and others.

John and Paul elevated *agape* to a core theological concept, indeed, to the essence of the nature of God and the meaning of the incarnation in Jesus. Their language about God as *agape* needs to be understood in the context of the rejection and persecution of Christians at the time of their writing; it is inspirational, poetic, sustaining, and clearly intended to support and bind the early Christians together who were giving up everything they had and risking horrific torture and death for their faith: “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:39). John and Paul assured their communities that although they sacrificed much, they partook in everlasting love (*agape*). Jesus’ last supper sermon built the foundation for the eucharistic celebrations that would sustain Christians for millennia into the future: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love” (John 15:9). Paul also idealizes *agape* as the most fundamental spiritual gift in the famously poetic verse, “The greatest of these is love [*agape*]” (1 Corinthians 13:13). Love is the most important gift, grounding all else in a context in which one can only “see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

The good Samaritan and all three meanings of compassion The Good Samaritan story sheds light on all three meanings of compassion. As was noted above, Jesus told the parable in the context of affirming that *agape* for God and one’s neighbor is necessary for eternal life. The Hebrew word that was translated into Greek as *agape* in the commandment to love God is *ahab* (Deuteronomy 6:5). *Ahab* also is used in the Old Testament to refer to the love between

family members—husband and wife and parent and child. The love captured by *agape* is thus passionate, intimate, compelling, and genuine.

When asked by the expert in the law, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Luke’s narrative, Jesus said the Good Samaritan had *splagchnizomai* for the man beset by thieves. Then, when Jesus asked the man, “Which one was a neighbor?” Luke recounted that the expert in the law answered, “The one who showed mercy [*eleos*]” (Luke 10:37). *Splagchnizomai* is the Good Samaritan’s internal experience of compassion that, from the depths of his soul, propels him to restore the stranger’s connection with others by restituting the robbery and harm with caring. Jesus’ telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates his conviction of the universality of the capacity to give and receive compassion. Samaritans were an offshoot of the people of Israel, estranged from Jesus’s Jewish contemporaries, revering a different version of Scripture, and worshipping at a different temple. Just previous to the story, Jesus and his disciples had visited Samaria and been rejected, and Jesus had rebuked and curbed the disciples’ desire for revenge (Luke 9:51–56).³ He communicated all are capable of and entitled to the compassion that does the work of the gracious God, atoning for the sins of others by repairing the impact of their cruelty with diligent care. Compassion is also a balanced kind of care; it makes use of wise delegation. The Good Samaritan delegated care of the wounded man to the innkeeper’s staff and carried out his errand. Compassion is not just for persons from one’s tribe but is to be given universally.

So also did the ECP youths describe compassion. Their examples of acts of compassion frequently included care for strangers, including homeless persons on the street, a new teen at school, and a disabled person on the bus.

Descriptions of compassion by Empowering Counseling Program youths

Capacity for compassion in every Empowering Counseling Program youth

Every young person we interviewed was able to describe and define compassion and articulately reflect on giving compassion to others. Even those youths who said they had never received compassion from anyone sought to give it, contrary to the common view that someone has to have received compassion to give it. They said they knew being deprived of compassion caused pain, and they did not want others to suffer as they did. Further, even youth who were aggressive in the program, and even the few who admitted to having killed someone, still sought to express compassion toward their community’s children. Their ideal of compassion could co-exist in their minds with despair and even, for a few, with homicidal rage.

Readers should keep in mind that our sample of youth had sought a program in which they could develop their own relatedness and competence and prioritize the experience of caring for others. Children with severe disabilities and those in detention centers could not participate. While it may not be accurate to generalize from our findings to all youth in urban high-poverty, high-crime African American communities, certainly, the youths’ unified voices of

³ John’s picture of Samaritans includes the famous story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well during his journey through Samaria (4:4–42). In the Eastern Christian tradition, the woman, Photina, became an evangelist and martyr for her Christian faith and was beatified.

compassion negate common social stereotypes of impoverished youth of color as “all gang-bangers,” as the youths put it. Moreover, whereas psychologists have found that social exclusion and rejection seem to, at least temporarily, reduce persons’ prosocial motivation (Twenge et al., 2007), these youths’ prosocial motivations persisted despite those obstacles and were prominent reasons they wanted to join the ECP programs.

Elements of compassion

A qualitative analysis indicated that the ECP youths’ understandings of compassion could be broken down into three elements: love, virtue, and trust. The love aspect of compassion was most resonant with Nouwen’s definitions (see Appendix 2). They regarded this inner force of love as universal and compelling. Their description of the love aspect of compassion is represented by the definition of compassion as “a flow that pushes you” and the following example:

I think when you have a feeling [of compassion], you need to do something right, or [I mean] it’s gonna, it’s gonna come from your heart. Like love comes from, I mean love, when you love someone, you love from your heart. That’s why I think they have a symbol of a heart. And so, I think it comes from your heart.

The youths understood the virtue aspect of compassion as a value of goodness, defining a compassionate person as “someone who is good, someone who treats others with respect and [is] kind, mature” and compassion as “the good in people.” This virtue, which the youths regarded as a stable obligation, resembled the *eleos* or covenantal form of compassion in Scripture noted above. The trust element of compassion meant to the youths that compassion is honest and authentic; “It’s basically like saying another term for trust.”

The youths’ examples of compassionate acts had several dimensions. They understood compassion to be an action that could heal communities. Their example was putting on a community forum advocating nonviolence (Voices of We Who Are Violence-Free) in response to six drive-by shootings that menaced their mentees’ school:

Just [helping] us put on this community nonviolence forum.. .. Us all together reaching out towards the community to promote nonviolence within our community because it’s very high, that alone just shows compassion. .. when you actually try to do something about the problem, that is when it really works the most.

Because anybody can say, “Okay, there’s violence.” But for that one person, or that group of people that’s going to actually stand up and say, “We don’t like the violence. We think that there are ways that you can go about a situation with a nonviolent approach,” just knowing that and knowing that every day when I walk outside of my house I’m faced with, “Okay, this might be my last day to live.” With the gun, with the gun violence, because. .. I’ve even lost count of how many kids died. .. due to gun violence and acts of violence. So, just knowing that, and knowing that we, as Stand Up! Help Out! [the name the youths chose for their ECP after-school program], want to make a change and a difference in our community, that’s just amazing to me.

At the end of their interviews, the youths were asked if they agreed with three definitions of compassion by Martin Luther King Jr., Henri Nouwen, and the Dalai Lama. While most agreed with all three and talked further about compassion in response to the quotes, they unanimously supported King’s view of compassion, which in part began with changing

oppressive social structures. King said, “True compassion. . . is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”

Compassion led the youths to comfort those who were grieving:

Someone in my family, they recently died. And, like, everyone was sad or whatever. But, like, I was trying to tell them that, like, “She’s in a better place now. She’s, like, better off now than living in the world.” Like, I was trying to help them and that’s the way I show compassion. . . I was at first [sad] too, but then I was, like, I tried to think of the better things. And that kind of helped me get over it. . . I think they were looking, like, “Wow, if someone that young,” ‘cause they are all older than me, so, “If someone that young can understand it like this, then it’s not hard for us to try it.”

Compassion also referred to reciprocating parental love, according to one youth:

One experience of compassion that I have and I always hold deeply is with my mom because, ah, where I live it’s just me and my mom, that’s a woman that’s taken care of me all of my life, so if there is anybody I have compassion for, it’s her and my family. On Mother’s Day I got her a gift and just basically that day I tell her I love her ‘cause tomorrow is not promised. . . God forbid that it happened, that something happened to you or her. . . You just want her to always know and for her to let you always know that y’all love each other. I think that makes her feel special and ‘cause some kids don’t have the love like that I have for my momma, so just to know that her child love her that much, I think that just makes her happy.

Compassion was the inner experience that led the youths to empathize and care for their child mentees:

My mentee, she seems to, like, catch a quick attitude if she doesn’t get her way. And I was talking to her, I was recently talking to her on Tuesday about it. I kept on asking her, like, “What’s bothering you?” because she seemed like something was really bothering her. So, I kept on asking her, and she didn’t really say anything to me, but she gave me a hug. And I guess when she hugged me she felt better. And then, after that, she was her normal self all over again. . . I think maybe she just needed somebody there to care about her and ask, actually ask her, “What’s bothering you?” because it makes it seem like somebody is there for you and actually cares about your feelings.

They understood compassion meant helping strangers, including a new student:

What feels good is that they tell me they’re there for me if I want to talk about it. . . like, some girl, she was having a problem and they kept on asking her, “What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” So, this girl was, like, “Well, forget them.” She wasn’t going to tell them. So, I was, like, “No, you can’t do that. You just got to give her time. She’s going to tell you on her own time.” You can’t force anybody. You can only help a person so far in their life, and then they have to be on their own at a certain point. . . I’m not just backing down and leaving her with the problem. Because, if you leave a person with the problem, then they might handle it the wrong way. . . Because some people, like, they may not have had that role model or that mother or father to help them growing up, and they may not know how to deal with a certain problem. So, as a friend, you should be there for them.

Compassion for strangers included those the youths encountered in their communities:

This lady, she was a senior citizen and, uh, she couldn't carry all of her bags. She was on the bus. And, uh, I got up and helped her with her bags and I gave her my seat. .. she was kind of struggling with the bags. But, when I helped her, she had a smile on her face and she was, like, "Thank you, thank you a lot". .. she offered me money, but I didn't accept it. .. because I didn't think I have to, I don't need, I don't deserve. .. I mean like, well, I don't need to be rewarded for doing something nice. .. by money; I wouldn't be rewarded by money. All I need is really a "thank you."

Compassion in action for the youths meant nonviolent ways to respond to having been hurt by others (which sadly, in the following example, assumes the police and the justice system would not be allies):

We were coming home together and there was a shot and we fell on the ground. They didn't hit us. I knew who I was with; I knew it was a mistake. My older sister found out who did it, [and] I was right. I thought and thought, and I decided, I have to forgive them. Their life will be ruined if I tell. I told her to tell them I forgive you, but you have to stop shooting, you have to stop.

As with the *eleos* and *agape* noted above, the young woman's compassion was a deeply reasoned response based on her value that love should prevail over hate and was closely tied to forgiveness. She regarded forgiveness as an obligation, to be extended even to those who could have killed her and her friends.

A common understanding of compassion is that it leads to 'compassion fatigue,' but for these youth the inner experience of giving compassion was the pleasure of a deep connection with others: "I felt good. I felt real happy that I had helped somebody somehow." "Compassion towards others makes me feel good. .. makes me feel that I have a place in this world." While most felt certain that they were doing the right thing when they acted on their compassion, others felt "awkward" and "not sure what was the right thing to do."

The inner experience of the person receiving compassion

When asked about the experience of receiving compassion, the ECP youths said that, above all, it caused them to feel valued and cared for, and they often gave examples of their ECP instructors and peers. They also gave examples from their parents, such as, "I called thirty minutes late and she was really worried about me and she was praying. I couldn't get to no phone or nothing, but I was supposed to come home." The mother called all the youth's friends, the youth continued, and added, "It feels like I got someone like looking over my shoulder and caring for me." Receiving compassion made them feel connected with others rather than alone: "I feel relief, like 'somebody's helping me.' And then I'll be, I'll feel happy." Compassion made them feel respected because one element of it was respecting the freedom of choice of the other and was opposed to pity, in their view, which was associated with being seen as less than capable. In fact, receiving compassion caused them to feel empowered and hopeful that they could change personal and community problems that they had felt hopeless about before (Guthrie et al., 2014). Just as the compassion of the pharaoh's daughter was developmental for Moses, ECP youths regarded compassion as fostering their development. One can readily see the joyful responses of the leper and the man who had been possessed by Legion in the youths' pleasure at being on the receiving end of compassion.

With regard to how compassion is developed, some of the youths argued for its innateness: “Did you ever know anyone without some good in them?” Others emphasized it was acquired:

You’re not necessarily born with compassion for others. It’s something that, like, a process that you have to go through. ‘Cause I know when I was younger, like in middle school, I wouldn’t really care about anybody else’s problems; I’d just care about myself. But then I learned, like, when other people didn’t care about my problems, how that made me feel. So, everybody needs somebody to talk to, so that, like, changed me or transformed me into having more compassion toward others.

Choosing compassion

The interviews and focus groups made it clear that while all the ECP youths experienced compassion, they did not always choose to act on it. So, the interviews began to focus on the issue of choice, and we asked 27 of the 97 in our subsample about the decision-making process entailed in whether or not to express the compassion they felt. Their obstacles to expressing compassion were primarily fear. They feared being rejected or betrayed and then shamed at being “gamed.” One young man gave a dramatic example of giving his last dollars to a woman who seemed to be pregnant and needing to go to the hospital to deliver her baby. He saw her again a week later saying the same thing, and he felt angry and mortified at having been “gamed.” Some youth feared they might be robbed or beaten if they helped strangers. Still others withheld compassion for peers out of fear that if they stood up for someone being bullied, they would be rejected by others: “I was trying to fit in with the kids. I didn’t say nothing; I just let [the bullying] go on instead of stopping it.” Another obstacle to expressing compassion was inner preoccupation with one’s own needs: “They don’t. .. really take account of other people’s feelings on how they would feel. They just think about their self at that time.”

But withholding compassion led to memorably miserable inner experiences: “It actually felt pretty bad because, like, when we was in sixth grade, I wasn’t really with the kids that was doing it [bullying], but... I wouldn’t tell anyone to stop or anything. And then, like, later, during that year, she had killed herself. So, then, it was like I felt like I probably could have stopped that if, had I taken action.” Our informant was haunted by the suicide of the bullied girl, believing that standing up for the bullied girl and showing compassion could have prevented her death.

On the other hand, choosing to act on their compassion felt universally and memorably good. It conveyed the pleasure of connection—“You could gain a friendship”—and an experience of oneself as virtuous—“It’s the right thing to do.” They saw compassion as a way to solve community problems of conflict and violence:

It doesn’t matter if they are enemies; if you need help, I’m going to help you, so I would just do that.” They felt that compassion was a gift to be passed along: “It’s a lot of stuff you can do to avoid certain situations [such as the suicide of a suffering person]. .. and then somebody was compassionate to me that day [when her brother

passed], and I think about that when I see other people down and then I just show compassion to them.

In summary, from an etic (objective) point of view, the moment of compassion is intensely personal, localized to time and place.⁴ But from a subjective, or emic, point of view, the youths experienced compassion as not bound to time or place, not a static “trait,” but an experience enduring internally through time, over different contexts and relationships. The experience of compassion resides in a reflective space within each person in which memories of giving and receiving compassion are associated with pleasure, hope, increased self-determination, deepened connection with others, and a fulfilled ideal related to justice. Memories of when compassion was withheld (either from oneself or from others) are painful and motivate persons to avoid repeating that pain and instead choose compassion. The youths’ acts of compassion were not mere imitation but were creatively generated within that reflective space from memories of what they wanted but did not receive, as well as from acts of compassion they did receive and sought to pass on to others.

Commonalities

Although we have drawn some parallels above between the youths’ understanding of compassion and compassion in Scripture, more exist, as we describe below. Similarities between the historical record of the Christ event in Scripture and contemporary experiences set our current experience in the light of Jesus’ life and illuminate Jesus’ life with meanings from our own lives. This is a necessary part of making Jesus real to us in our time, given the distance in time between our life and Jesus’ life (Frei, 2013).

Compassion as the youths described it and as it is recounted in both Old Testament and New Testament contexts occurs in response to profound suffering, whether it is the Moses story of the horror of enslavement and a baby endangered by infanticide, or Jesus’ healing of the leper’s dreadful disease and resulting social alienation, or the Good Samaritan’s response to the cruel wounds of the crime victim. Horrible suffering can feel like it overshadows compassion, but in fact Jesus’ compassionate acts of healing demonstrate the love of God prevailing. The horror shifts into a process that, paraphrasing Tracy (2014), leads to a final blessing, even the overcoming of evil and death.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke described Jesus’ compassion as a powerful inward force that moved him to heal, to teach, to feed the hungry, to offer wisdom in the form of stories, to defeat evil, and even to raise persons from the dead. *Splagchnizomai* compelled him to heal, and even if he wanted to keep it secret, he could not resist his own compassion. Similarly, the ECP youths discovered that, although they could choose to be compassionate or not, withholding compassion caused them more intense inner distress than did occasional disappointment from expressing compassion (such as when they were duped). The desolation accompanying the absence of compassion, either when they chose not to act on it or when they needed it and did not receive it, was extremely painful for the youths. For some, the pain of not receiving compassion was so great that the memory

⁴ The distinction between *etic* and *emic* is traditionally used in ethnographic research to distinguish a perspective looking from the outside at a person or culture (*etic*) from one looking from inside the individual’s subjective experience and culture (*emic*) (Kottak, 2006).

remained deep inside and motivated them to care for others as they had not been cared for so as to forestall others experiencing similar pain. Those who had experienced the withholding of compassion preferred to never experience that suffering again and strove to generously give compassion whenever they could. Old Testament and New Testament stories are replete with persons experiencing the pain of feeling separated from God's compassion: for example, Job in the Old Testament, the Psalmist's question "My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22: 1 KJV) echoed (in Mark 15:24 and Matthew 27:46) by Jesus on the cross, and Peter's anguish after his three denials of his Lord (Matthew 26: 69–75).

The youths described examples similar to biblical stories of compassion: a person asking for help, a baby crying and needing care, a person suffering from mental anguish, a grief-stricken family member. And, as the ECP youths pointed out, compassion offers an alternative to violence as a response to horror. In their view, compassion brings about hope (Guthrie et al., 2014), despite their context of poverty, racism, and community violence. Both biblical compassion and compassion as expressed by the youths are change processes—the person giving compassion is compelled and moved to care so that the suffering person who receives compassion goes beyond the horror into an internal space where peace, compassion for self and others, and even joy, as the leper shows us, are possible.

The youths' versions of compassion prioritized respect for the person receiving care. The youth understood their compassion was respectful of others' autonomy and dignity and could heal someone's experience of rejection and alienation, provide hope, and be a means for building a more just society. The examples of compassion the youth expressed were always responses to their perception that someone needed their care, such as an anxious new girl at school, a homeless person, an elderly person needing help on the bus, a grieving relative. Similarly, Jesus' compassion was always in response to movements of others toward him—following him, asking for help, expressing grief, questioning, wanting to believe yet uncertain. Compassion as the youths described it was not impulsive but rather wise and respectful. Like Jesus' approach to teaching through parables and his focus on respecting the autonomous choice of others to believe or not, or to follow or not, compassion as the youths described it took the form of guiding support rather than intrusive prescriptions. As one youth said, describing her grandmother's compassion, "She doesn't tell me what to do. She helps me figure out what I really want to do." The picture that emerges from both Scripture and the interviews with ECP youths is that compassion deeply respects humans' freedom of choice and responds to humans' distress with multiple forms of care and consolation.

From a theological standpoint, one can see two kinds of freedom resulting from compassion. One is the person's absolute freedom to say yes or no to God (Rahner 1978). Jesus' acts of compassion always occurred in response to people's requests for help, as was true of the youths' sensitivity to the freedom of choice of the person to whom they gave compassion. Freedom also occurs in the self-experience of the giver of compassion in that the youths described choosing whether or not to act on their compassion. It is a choice to give or receive compassion; "The acceptance of grace is once again an event of grace itself" (Rahner 1978, p. 118).

The second type of freedom resulting from compassion concerns freedom from societal oppressions, or liberation. The impact of Jesus' compassion was always to give the person greater liberation—freedom from the marginalization created by illness, disability, grief, hunger, and ignorance. Similarly, the compassion the ECP youths valued so much aimed to

increase their liberation from violence, to increase their human capital and win more freedom from poverty, and to remedy inequalities by enhancing the capacities of the children they chose to mentor. In this second meaning of freedom, the youth concurred with Martin Luther King Jr.'s description of true compassion as a force of liberation from shackling structures of society such as poverty and racial discrimination.

The youths described compassion as a pleasurable, powerful connection and often used the synonym 'love' to describe it. While some of the youths were not sure they expressed their compassion in a way that accurately cared for the receiver, most felt compelled by compassion and experienced no doubt about how they were expressing it. In this sense, as Nouwen often described (Nouwen et al., 1982), the consolation offered by compassion (for giver and receiver) was an intimate connection that was inherently satisfying for both. Many New Testament images come to mind of Jesus' intense intimacy with those whom he loved and those who loved him, which the pleasure of compassionate connection reflects. In this sense, the intimate connection aspect of compassion resembles what Rahner (1978) describes:

When we say that God is present for us in an absolute self-communication, this says... that this self-communication of God is present in the mode of closeness, and not only in the mode of distant presence... a closeness in which God does not become a categorical and individual being, but he is nevertheless really present as one communicating himself, and not only as the distant, incomprehensible, and asymptotic term of our transcendence. (p. 119)

To the youths, compassion was a gift to be passed on and an experience they found so pleasurable that they sought out social service programs that would allow them to continue caring for others and also recruited their friends. Like the healed leper or the paralyzed man who could run to tell others, or the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and "loved much," the fruits of compassion appear to be best represented by what Pope Francis calls "evangelii gaudium," the joy of the gospel (Pope Francis, 2017).

Conclusions

We have described the common ground between understandings of compassion provided by urban African American youths residing in high-poverty, high-crime communities and acts of compassion in the Old and New Testaments. Our scriptural interpretation was grounded in Hans Frei's method of biblical interpretation (Frei, 2013), which draws explicitly on the nature of the persons and events recounted in Scripture as a means to connect with the identity of God and Jesus in our time. We analyzed three words used to translate compassion in their New Testament contexts: *splagchnizomai*, *eleos*, and *agape*. The three terms describe fundamentally different aspects of compassion. While all three refer to the nature of God and also of Jesus, *splagchnizomai* refers exclusively to an irresistible inner experience, one that is specific to a particular time and relationship. *Eleos* refers to God's mercy, the forgiveness of sin, most often the fulfillment of a timeless covenant between God and persons, and is frequently represented by Jesus' many acts of forgiveness. The examples of Jesus' compassion, an irresistible inner force, reveal it to be a force that naturally bridges and breaks down sociocultural barriers, whether it is the healing of the leper, restoring him to his community, or the ministrations of the societally

denigrated Samaritan that healed the harm done to the traveler by the thieves. *Agape* is generally used, especially in John's and Paul's writings, to describe the nature of God and Jesus, including their indwelling in persons, a commandment to love God and neighbor that persons are made capable of following. *Agape* as described by John and Paul and represented by Jesus has the broadest possible scope—it is the basis for the new Christian ethic, the core of Christian theology and Christology (“God is love”; 1 John 4:8), and the greatest gift of the Spirit. Both *eleos* and *splagchnizomai* flow from God's *agape*.

As a verb or a process, compassion in any of the three forms it appears in the Bible transforms suffering by replacing alienation with connection. This is mirrored in what the ECP youths in our study described. Despite the potential for bitterness that could reasonably be expected to result from the many experiences of injustice and suffering to which these youths were subjected, they found being able to have a positive impact on the profound suffering they saw in their communities both inspiring and heartening. Their experiences of compassion from their instructors and each other gave them hope that they could fulfill their future dreams. Their passion for liberation and for caring for the children in their community and for passing on compassion mirrors the compassion of the pharaoh's daughter, whose compassion in adopting Moses was the seed of a liberation movement that has been a constant inspiration for those seeking freedom through the ages.

Pastors can derive many suggestions about working with youth and fostering compassion in their parishes from this project. Parishes can be helped to overcome the alienation of residential segregation through partnership programs that stimulate caring relationships, such as mentoring and tutoring, which are especially valued by youth and offer opportunities for them to express compassion. To carry out effective violence prevention, pastors can consider fostering empathy and compassion in youth, empowering them to use their compassion to respond with care to community problems. Future research could explore the compassion young people bring with them and how specific curricular and program elements develop compassion.

The unleashing and supporting of the ECP youths' compassion offers ideas for pastors seeking to find ways to engage youth in surmounting the massive obstacles confronting them due to contemporary social inequalities. Humans behave violently not because of some mystical genetic or physical flaw but because their experiences have shaped them to that end (Perry, 1997). Violence is not inevitable; it can be healed (Hoffman et al. 2011). The ECP youths regarded the seeds of that healing as the compassion that exists in persons—the “home in the heart for peace” as described by Pope John (1963).

As in the biblical examples discussed in this article, mercy is a companion of compassion in the sense that Jesus gave compassion bountifully, especially to those in greatest need: “She loves more because she is forgiven more” (Luke 7:47). For their part, the ECP youths reside in a war zone. They go to school and try to live their daily lives amidst bullets, experiencing the loss of neighbors and family members to community violence and health conditions that would be readily curable were it not for the horrors and isolation of poverty. The youth are, every moment, exposed to the profound psychological stressors of living in constant danger and being rejected by society, and their survival is endangered by deep poverty. They are deeply wronged. As Payne points out, animals perceive and are outraged by injustice, but humans are even more outraged (Payne, 2017). Yet, not a single ECP youth limited their compassion to people of their own race, social class, or neighborhood—even though they themselves had not received that equal treatment from their society. In order for these youth to experience compassion, they had to also

experience its companion, mercy: “With mercy and forgiveness, God goes beyond justice, he subsumes it and exceeds it in a higher event in which we experience love, which is at the root of true justice” (Pope Francis, 2016). In concert with Martin Luther King Jr.’s focus on love and compassion as building blocks of true justice, the youths affirmed that giving and receiving compassion is an essential way they move toward the fulfillment of the justice they deserve. The meaning of compassion as voiced by these youths varied from person to person and was expressed in different ways, but it was universally present, readily activated, and given and received free of the prejudices that haunt humanity. One feature of oppression is silencing, but when bonds of silence are broken and persons struggling with oppression are heard, much can be learned about our human nature and the grace residing among us.

Appendix 1

Student-Led Program Evaluation

1. How would you describe this program to someone?
2. Why did you decide to join this program?
3. Why did you decide to keep coming to it?
4. Talk some about your favorite part of the program.
5. Talk some about a part of the program you did not enjoy.
6. We would like feedback on each part of the program.
 - a. What about the mentoring with the kids did you enjoy or did you think went well?
 - b. What about the mentoring program would you change?
7. Do you feel you learned from this program? If yes, what? If no, why do you think you didn’t learn anything?
8. Did you learn anything about yourself (or your capabilities) from this program? Can you give examples?
9. Give feedback to the instructors: Tell them how they are doing a good job and what they need to work on.

Instructor 1 (will be named in actual interview).

Instructor 2 (will be named in actual interview)
10. Do you feel the instructors helped you? If so, how?
11. Talk some about the After School Matters team – that is, you and your peers. Do you feel everyone worked together? Were there ever any problems with the team?
12. Did you feel like you were able to make decisions and contributed about the activities you participated in? Can you give some examples?
13. Did you have any opportunities to be a leader in the program? Talk some about your experiences.
14. What skills did you contribute to this program?
15. On a scale of 1–10, where 1 means you were not interested at all and 10 means you were always involved in the program, how interested would you say you were in this program?

- a. Why did you give yourself that rating?
16. Why do you think that some apprentices had poor attendance at the program?
17. Has the program influenced you and your goals outside of the program?
18. Give one way for this program to be improved.
19. What would you like to do in the next program? Ideas for documentary topics? Other activities? What would you like to learn?

Appendix 2

Compassion Interviews

1. What do you think of when you hear the word ‘compassion’?
2. Can you give me an example of when you made a decision to act on compassion you were feeling?
 - What was the compassion like?
 - Why did you choose to act on it?
 - Did you feel there might be any negative consequences to acting on it?
 - Did you see any positive results from your acting on your compassion?
3. What is your experience of receiving compassion from others? Can you give an example of what the other person did to express compassion for you?
4. How do you think you developed your ability to be compassionate?
5. (If the apprentice has not yet mentioned the program) Do you feel participating in this After School Matters program helped you develop compassion?
 - If yes, how so? If not, why do you think it didn’t?
6. Do you have an example of when you felt compassion and wanted to act on it, but decided not to?
 - What was the compassion like? What kept you from acting on it? What negative consequences were you concerned might happen if you acted on it?
7. What helps you hold onto (stay in touch with) your compassion? (try to get specific examples and context).
8. What happens that can throw you off of it and make it hard to experience compassion? (try to get specific examples and context).
9. Does compassion help people grow? How so?
10. Do you think there are people who lack compassion? Do you think they can change? What would change them?
11. Anything else you think would help us to understand how to help youth choose to act compassionately?
12. What do you think of the following elements of definitions of compassion (these are printed up and given to the teen and also read to him or her during the interview)?
 1. True compassion. .. is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.
 2. Compassion and nonviolence help us to see the enemy’s point of view, to hear their questions, to know their assessment of ourselves.

3. For from their point of view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers and sisters who are called the opposition. *Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

4. Let me explain what we mean by compassion. Usually, our concept of compassion or love refers to the feeling of closeness we have with our friends and loved ones.

5. Sometimes compassion also carries a sense of pity. This is wrong—any love or compassion which entails looking down on the other is not genuine compassion.

6. To be genuine, compassion must be based on respect for the other, and on the realization that others have the right to be happy and overcome suffering just as much as you. On this basis, since you can see that others are suffering, you develop a genuine sense of concern for them... .

7. Genuine compassion is based on the recognition that others have the right to happiness just like yourself, and therefore even your enemy is a human being with the same wish for happiness as you, and the same right to happiness as you. A sense of concern developed on this basis is what we call compassion; it extends to everyone, irrespective of whether the person's attitude toward you is hostile or friendly. *The Dalai Lama*

8. [Compassion] is not a bending toward the under-privileged from a privileged position; it is not a reaching out from on high to those who are less fortunate below; it is not a gesture of sympathy or pity for those who fail to make it in the upward pull.

9. On the contrary, compassion means going directly to those people and places where suffering is most acute and building a home there. Father Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on Christian Life*

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Data availability Coding manuals are available upon request. Instruments are available in the appendices.

Declarations

Ethics approvals All procedures performed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Loyola University Chicago Institutional Review Board and the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. The study design was reviewed and approved by the Loyola University of Chicago Institutional Review Board.

All research participants' guardians signed informed consents for the youths to participate, and all youths signed informed assents for their participation.

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Affiliations

Katherine Tyson McCrea¹ • C. Kevin Gillespie²

C. Kevin Gillespie
kgillespie@trinity.org

¹ Empowering Counseling Program, Loyola University of Chicago School of Social Work, 1 East Pearson St. #422, Chicago, IL 60611, USA

² Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Holy Trinity Parish, Georgetown University, 3513 N. St. NW, Washington, DC 20007, USA